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The Canon is el Boom, et. al., or the Hispanic Difference

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Gene H. Bell-Villada,

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Thematic Issue *Comparative Cultural Studies and Latin America*

Edited by Sophia A. McClennen and Earl E. Fitz

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Abstract: In his article, Gene H. Bell-Villada's "The Canon is el Boom, et. al., or the Hispanic Difference," argues that the rich, globally acclaimed, foundational yet contestatory prose literature produced in Latin America allows teachers and scholars of Spanish to teach what is essentially the "canon" via work that is still fresh, yet historically provocative. Bell-Villada argues that in a time of reconsidering the importance of literature in literature programs, programs of Spanish language and culture should continue to teach this rich cultural legacy. The average U. S. student's condescension toward Spanish and Latin American culture can be transformed to respect after an encounter with writers like García Márquez, Borges, and similar writers of acclaim and when students encounter Nobel Prize winning authors in a course on Latin America their understanding of the region moves beyond the "Taco Bell" stereotype. Focusing courses on the "great works" of literature also allows students to rediscover the pleasure in the text making course material accessible and appealing. Further, Bell-Villada suggests that these texts allow us to include material on such topics as U.S. imperialism, race issues, political oppression, and world-system structures of power. For these reasons alone, literature is essential to a project dedicated to teaching students the ways that Hispanic culture is both different and intellectually valuable.

Gene BELL-VILLADA

The Canon is el Boom, et. al., or the Hispanic Difference

It is not too long ago -- three or four decades, perhaps -- that Hispanic literatures were considered a marginal player in comparative studies. The unofficial "Big Three" in the field were English, French, and German (in no particular order). Next came, say, Russian or Italian. Spanish stood a distant third. A novice twenty-something who chose to focus on the language of Spain and the other America might, from time to time, encounter polite doubts, puzzled looks, and raised eyebrows. Things have changed, although not as much as we would actually like to believe. In dealing with this topic, I would like to take a brief look at the canon debates and other familiar polemics from the 1980s. But, with a difference, and this concerns the "Hispanic Difference" in the title of my paper. First, however, I must cite a revealing detail. Most readers of this essay are probably acquainted with a collection in the Graywolf Annual series edited by Rick Simonson and Scott Walker entitled *Multicultural Literacy: Opening up the American Mind* (1988). As its two-part title suggests, the volume comes in direct response to a pair of highly influential best-sellers from that decade, namely, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) and E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1988). The final nine pages of *Multicultural Literacy* consist of a heterogeneous list of about six hundred items. It was conceived as a corrective to the famous long list included at the end of Hirsch's volume, which the Graywolf editors had deemed too exclusively centered on established, white-European or U.S. figures and concepts. Accordingly, the new list includes Salvador Allende, the Anasazi, Béla Bartók and Bertolt Brecht, to pick a few entries from the first two letters of the alphabet. Well, among the names the editors deem essential for multicultural literacy are Pablo Neruda, Gabriel García Márquez, Manuel Puig, Jorge Luis Borges, and (of all people) Octavio Paz.

For those of us involved with Hispanic literatures, at least a couple of those names might come as a surprise. After all, within Latin America, Borges and Paz are the canon, the establishment, not the opposition or the counterculture. And yet, within the United States, even hallowed texts and artifacts from south of Texas can pose unsettling and even subversive challenges to the reigning mind and repertory of empire. Let me say something so obvious that our jaded, professionalized sensibilities have too often taken blithely for granted. To wit: Over the past six decades, a rich, globally acclaimed, foundational yet contestatory prose literature has emerged in Latin America, a flowering comparable to that which had taken place in nineteenth-century Russia. Prior to that, moreover, there had occurred an efflorescence of great verse, both in the hemisphere and on the Peninsula. This historical fact well serves our best and most noble purposes as comparative Hispanists. Thanks to such a cultural moment (which is not yet done) we are able to teach "the canon" via major works that remain artistically fresh and intellectually provocative, and that -- from the point of view of the ordinary reader enrolled in the classroom or on holiday at the beach -- can be moving, exciting, subliminally informative, and often funny. Texts such as these also help legitimate our cause as representatives of the culture of Latin America. As we all know, there is in this imperial nation (which the U.S. media have recently taken to referring to, simply yet inaccurately, as "America"), there is in this land a certain subtle condescension toward the people, products, and issues that are of Hispanic provenance. I can still remember my distant student days, when friends and acquaintances would ask me, "Gene, why are you in Spanish? Is there much Spanish literature worth reading?" More recently, in the early 1980s, conservative literary luminaries such as Anthony Burgess and John Simon dismissed the popularity of García Márquez as being scarcely more than ideologically motivated. And at a panel at the Modern Language Association of America convention that I happened to chair in the nation's capital in 1984, avant-garde novelist Ronald Sukenick dispatched Borges and García Márquez as mere imitators, respectively, of Kafka and Faulkner. On a related note, in the early 1990s I was looking for a publisher for my book *Art for Art's Sake and Literary Life* (published eventually in 1996). And at one point I got from University of Nebraska Press an extensive, detailed, anonymous report by a professor of comparative literature somewhere. The opinion was basically favorable and it did in time lead to the manuscript's being accepted for publication. Still, he/she had a few reservations. One of them concerned

my various sections dealing with Latin American authors -- with the Modernista poets and, later, with the Boom novelists. The outside reader found my discussions of "Spanish literature" (in the reader's words) to be "not very helpful." He/she suggested that I delete or cut them. And this scholar was a comparatist, mind you. In my reply, I argued, successfully, for retaining those sections.

The foregoing instances, however, stand for official opinion, *la historia oficial*, as the phrase goes. It is the older paradigm now facing challenges from and being replaced by a newer one. To shift age groups: not a few of our young students, both Anglo and Latino, start out blissfully unaware that there are such things as Hispanic Nobel Laureates, or indeed that the Boom ever happened. And when these eighteen-year olds encounter the likes of Neruda, Paz, and García Márquez, they pick up in the process a new respect for things Hispanic. Latino students, moreover, begin feeling a certain inchoate pride in the fact that such writing exists, and that it is written, moreover, in the language of their own households and perhaps even originates in the country where they were first born and raised. As a result of this reading they are equipped with concrete answers to come back with if ever one of their Anglo peers might ask, "Is there much stuff to read in Spanish?" From problems of attitude, I now move on to the larger, more intractable matter of the means of communication, of image reproduction -- what Fredric Jameson aptly calls in his 1988 article "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" the "media society" (204). Our ear drums and eyeballs now live thoroughly surrounded and assaulted by a universe of man-made simulacra, of representations beyond counting, most of them as technically dazzling and skillful as they are ephemeral, ethnocentric, reactionary, silly, or just plain wrong. This highly seductive schlock is in turn gobbled up in all innocence by our young charges, who go on to internalize the world-view imparted by the media. With our modest pedagogical labors we can do our little bit to counteract media glitz and offer a more authentic, more complex, and yes, more truthful alternative vision of this country and its neo-colonies to the south of us. And so, for instance, we can have our students read a long novel filled with love, sex, and war, in which the culminating chapters narrate a banana workers' strike against a U.S. agribusiness firm -- an episode, incidentally, that adheres closely to the facts of a real such strike from 1928 (no need to mention the title of that now-classic 1967 book here). And we can expose our young minds to the historical experiences of race and racism through the poetry of Nicolás Guillén. We can introduce them to a world-system analysis that is as witty and passionate as it is informative in Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America* (1970). We can give them an immediate taste of U.S. sponsored repression via Rigoberta Menchú's memoir (1983) and also the film *When the Mountains Tremble* (1983) -- this in spite of the campaign against her both from the thuggish right and the genteel, vital center. And we can provide them a vivid glimpse of 1960s student activism and show the repressive power of the Mexican State in Poniatowska's *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971).

Political content aside, our engagement with such authors enables us to point our advanced students toward the Euro-American modernist classics. One of my regular assignments is to have my senior seminarians write a paper comparing García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* with Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* To many of them, it is their first encounter with Faulkner, and it provides an opportunity to acquaint them both with this astounding North American novel and with the techniques and resources of post-realist narrative. Another obvious instances is to lead them to Kafka by way of Borges, and in my survey course I assign a comparison between "La Biblioteca de Babel" (1941) and Kafka's "The Great Wall of China" (1931; it is worth noting that Kafka's text was translated by Borges into Spanish). Other examples: having them read Nicolás Guillén along with Langston Hughes's translations of the Cuban's poetry. Or comparing Fuentes's *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962) with Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941). This way they find out that there are indeed great U.S. films before 1981, some of them even in black-and-white, not to mention slow-paced (I'll never forget overhearing a bright undergraduate of mine observing casually that she liked watching old movies -- from the nineteen eighties...). In addition, in an advanced course, taught maybe in combination with a colleague from English, we can call attention to the formative influence that these authors have had on U.S. writing. For the first time in history, some of the key foreign influences on North American literature come not from England or France, but from Latin

America. Borges's art helped redirect much of U.S. fiction in the 1960s and 1970s, as shown in the work of Barth, Pynchon, Coover, Barthelme, and John Gardner. The hand of García Márquez is clearly visible, and sometimes acknowledged, in the narratives and in the public statements of Paul Theroux, William Kennedy, Anne Tyler, Alice Walker, John Nichols, and again Robert Coover. These are impressive cultural realities and they can be conveyed to our students under the appropriate circumstances. Finally, exposure to these authors and their biographies helps widen the ideological horizons of our students. It comes to them invariably as a surprise, and as a supreme absurdity, when I inform them that García Márquez spent more than three decades on the Immigration and Naturalization Service's official blacklist. And the left in general gains standing in their eyes when they find out that Neruda, Vallejo, and Guillén were Marxist activists, or that Carpentier was a staunch supporter of the Cuban revolution. The radical, left-wing consciousness of most Latin American authors may be something we lettered folks take for granted but, to most young students here in the empire, it will always be news.

Just a brief digression into popular culture. There is music, as represented in the most crucial work of Violeta Parra, Mercedes Sosa, Silvio Rodríguez, and Pablo Milanés. My friend Avi Chomsky has utilized their songs to good effect in her history courses at Salem State College, and listening to and singing along with *nueva trova* lyrics can prove a positive experience even in our language classes, whether the music be heard from an old-fashioned record player or in a high-tech, multi-media presentation. And then there is the political salsa music of Rubén Blades, himself a presence on the U.S. entertainment-industry scene and participant in many fine movies. And of course film, which by now is an integral part of our curriculum, though within a sobering, even alarming larger context. As we all know, foreign films are an endangered species in these United States where ticket sales for non-Hollywood items have hit rock-bottom. I am informed by Jerry Carlson, who teaches film studies in the CUNY system, that, in 1980, there were about a hundred foreign-language film titles shown on U.S. big screens. By 1990, the total figure had dropped to a mere twenty! That is very much of a collapse of an entire subculture. Even as I speak, excellent French, Italian, and German films are being rejected summarily by commercial movie-house managers, and are relegated instead to campus or museum venues and to cinemathèque screenings.

And yet, once again there is that Hispanic difference. Carlos Saura's recent movies featuring dance have drawn good crowds and become standard reference points, notably his flamenco version of *Blood Wedding* (1981), an old friend within many of our syllabi. Gutiérrez Alea's last two works *Strawberry and Chocolate* (*Fresa y chocolate*, 1994) and *Guantanamera* (1997), are classics in their own right among certain segments of the U.S. filmgoing audience. Last but not least, there is Almodóvar, who utilizes the best and most significant aspects of world-pop culture in movies that dramatize transgressive, post-modern sexual concerns, that garner international awards, and that, needless to say, are outrageous in their humor. Moreover, in one of his more recent works, the Oscar-winning *All About My Mother* (*Todo sobre mi madre*, 2000) Almodóvar intertexts with *All about Eve* (1950) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), and thereby furnishes us instructors an excellent pretext for leading our students to two quite disturbing yet firmly canonical U.S. works from fifty years ago -- one of them even in black-and-white, and just right in that format. At this writing Almodóvar is barely fifty, and if he stays alive and holds on to his genius, he will continue enriching our canon and our course offerings. Two more reflections before I close. I once watched a public interview with the great German moviemaker Werner Herzog in Berkeley, California. At one point a member of the audience asked him how he saw his role as filmmaker. I do not remember the exact words from Herzog's reply, but they were something to the effect that, in a world filled with facile, degrading, or misleading images, he feels called upon to offer images that are richer, more complex, and more reliable. From the drift of my talk, I think you can draw the analogy between Herzog's stated mission and our own.

My final point has to do with an aspect of academic politics that I am sure readers of this essay will be familiar with. I approach it by way of a personal anecdote. Back in the year 2000, a Chicano student wrote a letter to the editor of the Williams College student paper, protesting the absence of authors such as Borges and Isabel Allende in *English* department courses (note my emphasis). In a reply, I reminded him, 1) that Borges and Allende are *not* Anglophone literary figures, 2) that

the Department of English does not have among its duties the teaching of authors from Latin America or for that matter from Norway or Russia or Japan, and 3) that in our modest little Spanish and comparative literature programs we teach Borges and other such writers, both in Spanish and in English translation. You all get my point: among students, there is this vague superstition, this falsely universalistic notion that all literary study belongs in and is to be found in English classes. Among professors of English, by the same token, there is the understandable desire to broaden their enrollments and reading lists by including Latin American texts. Nothing wrong with that, and a good thing for all concerned. The more the merrier, to quote some lesser-known if oft-quoted theorist. Still, we on our campuses should make it clear that the authors, musicians, and filmmakers I have been dealing with are *Hispanic* cultural figures and that their natural academic venue is in our classes. It is all too obvious, but one of the ongoing missions of us in the comparative-Hispanist fold is to ensure that we do not forfeit our canonical figures to the hegemony of U.S. English (pun intended), as has already occurred with writers such as Dante and Kafka.

Allow me to conclude with a reference to the theory of *dependencia*, allegedly now rendered obsolete and irrelevant by the triumph of neo-liberal globalization. Among the notorious cultural effects of underdevelopment is that unfortunate tendency toward slavishly imitating foreign, metropolitan models at the expense of one's own local products. In our little academic rococo, we have our own *dependencia* in the attempts to follow the lead of the folks in English, and, for instance, to question the Latin American "Boom" and the resultant canon (the pun here is accidental). I submit that, at this time in history, the canon, with all its related consequences, stands as the best we have, and by and large it is a culture of challenge and opposition to the overall status quo. And that is why it continues to be worth teaching to our students.

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